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ABSTRACT

People act in environmentally sound ways for many reasons, but the best motivation is wanting to act in the public good and knowing how to do it. Education and socialization internalize socially responsible behavior. Land grant university education and extension are based on internalizing the right thing to do and learning the right way to do it. Formal and informal education can help people appreciate the environment and its important ecological functions, as well as teach them how to work with and enhance those ecological functions. When internalization is absent, peer pressure may result in positive or negative actions toward the environment. However, community counts in terms of environmental quality and may turn peer pressure from a negative to a positive. When internalization and peer pressure do not work, economic incentives or penalties may encourage land managers to practice conservation. Force is the final and most costly mechanism for preventing environmentally damaging behavior. Internalization and peer pressure work well with farmers in an agrarian environment but not with those who live elsewhere and make decisions about environmental practices. If education for ecological health is going to improve ecosystem health, we must rethink whom we are talking to and why we are talking to them, and we must think more in terms of actors who are not rooted in place and who have various relationships to land, labor, and capital. Both farm managers and the bankers who loan them money must be educated about environmentally sustainable practices and how they can be profitable. (SV)

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From the Director

Community Building for a Healthy Ecosystem

by Cornelia Butler Flora

Why would people act in an environmentally sound way, however that may be defined? The best way is for people to want to do so and know how to do so.

As people strive to act in the public good, there are some types of behavior that you instinctively avoid. For example, it would probably not occur to you to catch fish in a nearby lake by using dynamite. And if it did, you would consider how dynamite would kill all the fish, not just those you wanted to catch. Further, there would be damage to the ecosystem of the lake and someone might be hurt! If these things didn't bother you, then chances are you would not know how. There are no mentors, no classes, and no Extension bulletins that show the practical steps of dynamite fishing.

Much behavior has been internalized as a result of growing up in a particular family and in a particular community. For example, you would not throw a

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Cornelia Butler Flora

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beer bottle out of the car window because you know littering is irresponsible. You **know** what to do (not only do you not drink and drive, but you recycle those bottles), and you **want** a safe and clean environment.

Education and socialization internalize socially responsible behavior. Land grant university education and outreach is based on internalizing the right thing to do and learning the right way to do it. Formal and informal education can give people an appreciation of the environment and the important ecological functions it performs, as well as how to work with and enhance those ecological functions.

But suppose you don't care about the environment and figure two or three more bottles won't make a difference. If you are on an empty stretch of road and no one is with you, you might toss a bottle out. But if your friend, active in the recycling and community beautification activities, accompanies you, you do not throw it out. Peer pressure works.

Unfortunately peer pressure is both positive and negative, and can just as easily keep individuals from doing what they know is right. In many areas of field after field of corn and soybeans, local people value a controlled environment without trees. Trees are messy and disturb the controlled order of the agricultural landscape. Those who plant them know they are viewed as "bad farmers" — and so few trees are planted.

Community counts in terms of environmental quality, and can assist in turning peer pressure from a negative to a positive. Those who see their neighbors farming in an environmentally sound manner and see it working, may decide to try it themselves.

Only when these two levels of social control (internalization and peer pressure) do not work, should we move to economic tools to influence people's behavior. The positive form of economic motivation is incentives: "It will be profitable if I do the environmentally sound thing." Industries find that pollution is an indicator of waste, and that the savings generated by the re-engineering and better use of inputs far exceed the costs of clean up. Farmers have learned that by applying less nitrogen, they can reduce input costs and not reduce yield at the same time that they reduce nutrification of ground and surface water. Another familiar economic incentive is government payments to implement a less environmentally destructive practice. An example is the payments to put land into the Conservation Reserve Program.

There is the belief that economic incentives are the only way to get land managers to act in the public interest. There is a further belief that only the Federal government can provide such incentives, and yet the Federal government is demonstrating decreasing political will to invest in conservation measures.

But community does count! An increasing number of state governments are offering tax breaks to support more environmentally sound land use in vulnerable areas. New rural-urban linkages are also being formed as city governments offer incentives for watershed conservation activities. In addition, private sector groups, from chemical companies to Trees Forever, are banding together to

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provide incentives for land users to do the right thing.

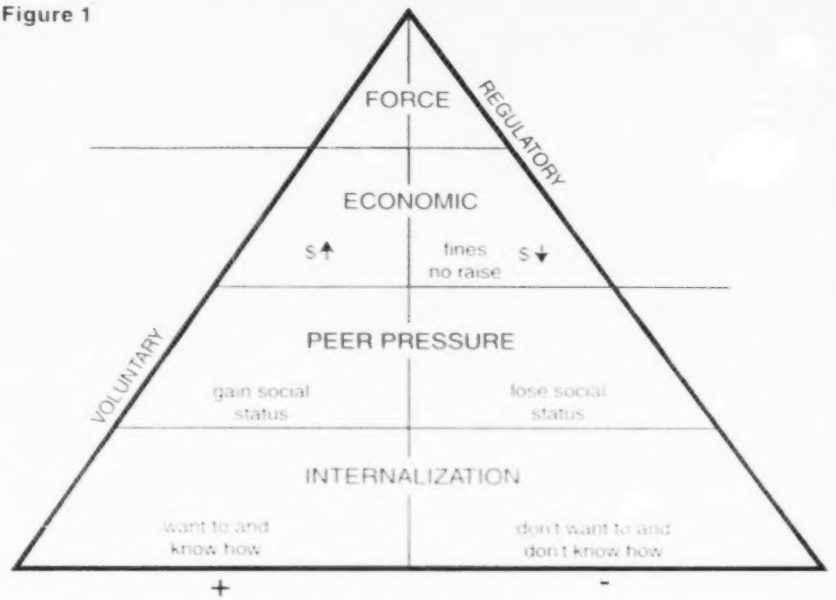
The mechanisms we have talked about so far, that cause people to act in environmentally responsible ways, can be classified as voluntary. They are generally well-accepted and well-liked. There are mechanisms, however, that attempt to enforce environmentally sound behavior that are viewed as much more coercive. Fines and penalty payments for pollution are examples of negative economic sanction.

Land managers and business owners find it normal for government to make it profitable to be moral (although some resent the strings and bureaucracy attached). However, most get very irritated when the government makes it unprofitable for them to engage in environmentally damaging behavior through regulation.

The last mechanism to get an individual to act for the public good is force. Force is physical and can be both negatively and positively used. A negative use would be to shut down or imprison an individual for failure to comply with environmentally sound behavior. A positive use would be to indicate that, if an individual does not clean out a drainage ditch that has been filled by soil eroding from a nearby field, the county will do it for you and you will be charged. Force is the most costly mechanism for society as well as for the individual who engages in environmentally damaging behavior, and should be used as little as possible.

As shown in figure 1, the greater the legitimacy of the cause, the nearer to the base of the pyramid the enforcement mechanism. Rules that are too often imposed by force are often ignored or changed, and the enforcer loses legitimacy. Thus regulations are constantly negotiated between the regulators (local, state, federal) and the regulated (possibly a local, state, national or global entity).

Figure 1



The lower order mechanisms of social control (internalization and peer pressure) work very well with the family farm. However, with the industrialization of agriculture, we are faced with the important institutional challenge of ownership being separated from management. When those making the decisions about environmental practices do not actually live on the farm or in the community, these mechanisms are less likely to be effective in encouraging environmentally sound behavior.

Land-grant institutions tend to recommend voluntary mechanisms (as indicated on the diagram), such as paying people to do the right thing. Negative, regulatory mechanisms alarm us, as they alarm our traditional clienteles.

Furthermore, we tend to not be very creative about figuring out at where we educate and apply peer pressure to positively impact the ecosystem. For example, a huge amount of farmland in Iowa is owned by widows. They are the owners, but are separated from management. If the person or company managing their land tells them a conservation buffer could be planted, but their earnings would go down, the owner will most likely keep her land exactly the way it is.

If education for ecological health is going to improve ecosystem health, we have to rethink whom we are talking to and why we are talking to them. And in reference to policy, we have to think less in terms of individuals that are rooted in place, and more in terms of a variety of actors who have a variety of relationships to land, to labor, and to capital.

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As a closing example, one of the reasons farmers did not implement more environmentally sustainable crop rotations (besides fear of losing their base acres) was that their bankers would not let them. The farmer would not get their operating money for next year. The banker did not want that farmer growing anything but commodity program crops, because that program would reduce the banker's risk that something would go wrong.

The need for alternative risk management mechanisms is now even greater with the 1996 Farm Bill, if environmental integrity is to in part guide land use behavior.

As we continue with our educational efforts, we have to figure out who should be educated. How do we educate bankers to make loans for more environmentally sustainable practices? How do we educate farm managers that they can still make money even though they will have to learn new skills to implement conservation buffers?

And most importantly, how do we set up institutions off the farm that allow changes that are environmentally sustainable on the farm? Changes that will be profitable (the market aspect) and relatively easy (the relational aspect), so that you don't have to be a hero or a martyr or a debt-free property owner/land manager to act for ecological health. ❐